Fairbury Area Country Schools

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Many farmers poured into the Fairbury area in the 1850s. Because farming in those days was so labor intensive, farmers often could not farm more than forty or eighty acres. These farmers often had many children so they could help with the farm work.

Country schools were established to educate all of these farm children. The theory was that children should not have to walk more than one mile to school. This goal resulted in country schools being located every two miles. The schools were often named after the farmer who owned the land where the country school was erected.

By 1897, there were over 6,000 school-age children in rural areas. This led to the establishment of 299 country schools in Livingston County. Each of these schools averaged between ten and twenty students.

The Fairbury rural area included Avoca, Indian Grove, and Belle Prairie townships. Seventeen country schools were constructed to educate the children from these townships.

The design of the country schools in the Fairbury area was similar, with some variations. Most of these buildings had one large classroom, with a small vestibule room attached to it. For example, the Pearson School north of Fairbury had one large room that measured thirty feet by twenty-four and a half feet. The small adjoined vestibule room measured fourteen feet by ten feet. Since the classroom was the large room, these were often called one-room schoolhouses.

Many of these schools used a stacked limestone rock foundation approximately one foot tall. Often a large wood beam was set on top of the rock foundation. The large beam was notched to hold the wood floor joists. Most of these schoolhouses had wood floors, plastered walls, and large chalkboards.

Initially, one wood-burning stove was used to heat the building. In later years, coal instead of wood was used as fuel. The students and the teacher often cooked their lunch food on top of the wood stove. Since these buildings usually were not insulated in the walls or ceilings, they were probably difficult to keep warm in the cold winter months.

Some of the country schools had a separate outhouse building. Others had a toilet in the small vestibule room. Most of these schools had an outside well with a hand pump for the water supply. Some of the schools got electricity in the 1930s. The children would listen to educational programs on the radio. They would also record grain prices. When they got home after school, they would report the grain prices to their father.

One school teacher taught grades one through eight in each school. The older students would often help the younger students with their reading, writing, or arithmetic assignments. Starting in the 1890s, a countywide eighth-grade graduation ceremony was held at Pontiac in Chautauqua Park. During the hard times of the 1930s, the budgets were cut for the country schools, and some eighth graders had their diploma mailed to them instead of the graduation ceremony at Chautauqua Park. After graduation, the students attended high school in Fairbury.

The country school students played a lot of softball and a game called Andy High Over. This game was basically volleyball, with the roof of the one-room schoolhouse being the net. The students split into two teams, one for each side of the building. One team would hit a rubber ball over the peak of the roof, and the other team had to return it. The teacher usually played in the game, and it instilled a sense of teamwork in the students.

Most of the teachers at the country schools attended two years at the Illinois State Normal University. In 1967, the name of this college was changed to Illinois State University.

In the Fairbury area country schools, the two most significant events of the year were the Christmas Party and the end-of-year literary and track meet. At the literary and track meet, students from other Fairbury area country schools were invited to compete. The fathers helped conduct outdoors track events. Blue, red, and white ribbons were awarded to the top three finishers.

Once the outdoor events were concluded, the students moved into the schoolhouse for the educational contests. These included spelling and math problems. The mothers helped conduct the educational games.

Farm mechanization dramatically reduced the amount of labor required on the farms. The number of farmers with their large families was no longer needed. The number of rural students in Livingston County peaked in 1897 at 6,000 students. By 1922, the number of students dropped to 3,400. This drop in enrollment continued, and by 1947, there were only 1,522 students. With 299 country schools, the average enrollment at each school dropped to only about five students.

Country schools started to close and consolidate during the 1930s because of lower enrollments and the hard times of the Great Depression. This closure rate accelerated in the 1940s, and by 1950 all the country schools in Livingston County were closed. The 1949-1950 school year was the last one for the Fairbury area country schools.

The country schools were usually sold after they closed. Some were converted to houses and some to farm machine sheds. Many of them were eventually torn down. There are at least two country schools in the Fairbury area which have been restored to their original conditions. One is the 1860 Phelps schoolhouse which was moved to Spence Farms south of Fairbury. Recently, a Chatsworth area schoolhouse was moved to downtown Chatsworth.

Since the last country schools in Livingston County closed in 1950, a first-grade student in 1949 would now be about 75 years old. Many people in this generation have fond memories of the time they spent in the country schools.

Back row - Emma Guthrie - Bessie Stock - Horace Bodley - Clinton Stewart - Clarence Friant - Jennie Draper - Carl Bankes
2nd row - Frances Bodley - Hope Meehan - John Friant - Frances Endicle - Lee Rice - Lama Tucker Esther Guthrie Hazel Banker Avis Bodley
Stewart
3rd row - Stewart - Granville Bodley - Ruth Stock - Charles Lasenes Teacher - Marie Draper - Pearl Bodley - Arnold Friant
Lodemia School - about 1907